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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TASHKENT 000826

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TAGS: [KIRF](#) [KISL](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [UZ](#)

SUBJECT: AN INVITATION TO FRIDAY PRAYER

REF: TASHKENT 809

Classified By: AMB. JON R. PURNELL FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D).

¶1. (U) This is the second in a series on the state of Islam in Uzbekistan, with future cables addressing the relationship of mosque and state and the growing market for Islamic materials and media.

¶2. (C) Summary: During a recent visit to a neighborhood mosque during Friday prayers, poloff observed worshipers gathered in a social atmosphere to catch up with each other and meet informally. Book vendors were peddling Uzbek language materials on Islam, each containing the GOU's seal of approval. Contrary to years past when the Karimov regime cracked down on all but the elderly who openly practiced their faith, poloff witnessed a congregation made up mainly of young men under the age of 30. Although under the watchful eye of the government, the pulpit is a primary source of spiritual and social direction for many people. These Imams are therefore unique in Uzbekistan, as they have weekly, if not daily, access over great numbers of the population, and can directly influence their thinking. End summary.

¶3. (C) Upon invitation by a local contact, poloff attended Friday prayers at a neighborhood mosque. Because the actual prayers are in Arabic, Imams begin a half hour prior to the official ceremony with a lecture in Uzbek to the gathering crowds. The Muslim Board of Uzbekistan determines the weekly theme and provides general guidance to Imams without dictating the message word-for-word. Although given leeway, the Imams keep their language in check, knowing that there are government informants among the crowd.

¶4. (C) Friday prayer, not unlike a Christian mass, seemed to be a social event where members of the congregation used the weekly opportunity to catch up with each other. As groups of friends and acquaintances formed both before and after the ceremony, it was evident that worshipers utilized the opportunity to gather and talk without the threat of prying eyes and ears. Poloff was told that networking for a job was not uncommon with the young men, and attending Friday prayer with a future father-in-law was in a suitor's best interest. Poloff is not Muslim and joined about a dozen Uzbeks in one section of the courtyard, seemingly the unofficial waiting area for non-practicing Uzbeks. These individuals claimed to be waiting for friends or family.

¶5. (C) In nearly every mosque, vendors offer for sale the latest prayer books and Islamic studies pamphlets in Uzbek. At some of the larger mosques, CDs, cassettes, and DVDs of

sermons, radio and television programs are also available. All of these materials are strictly regulated by the Committee for Religious Affairs, and are usually published with the Muslim Board's imprint. Any print material related to the Muslim faith must be pre-approved before publication and sale. Sales were brisk, and vendors could not keep up with customer demands. When asked, the seller told poloff that each week he sells more than 50 percent of his stock.

16. (C) Poloff observed that the majority of the all-male congregation was under the age of 30, at almost a two to one ratio. Contacts told poloff that after the 1999 Tashkent bombings, which were followed by wide-scale arrests of practicing Muslims, attendance by young men dropped significantly. At that time, it was understood that the elderly were no threat to the regime and allowed to practice their faith openly. Young men, however, were scrutinized and targeted as extremists should they pray five times a day or grow a beard. Now, with the changing demographics (it is estimated that more than 60 percent of the population is under 30) and a relaxing of restrictions by the government (reftel), the composition of the congregation has changed dramatically.

17. (C) Comment: With a clear lack of venues to gather and share information, Friday prayer is becoming an increasingly significant and effective method for disseminating any social or political message to the masses, particularly to youth. To date, the GOU has been relatively successful in controlling this message. However, the Imams are unique in Uzbekistan in that they have direct access to large swaths of the population on a regular basis. This access alone gives them significant influence in the daily lives of many Uzbeks,

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probably much more than the government enjoys.  
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